

CABINET

– 14 July 2026

Best Start Family Hubs

Report by Director of Children's Services

RECOMMENDATION

1. **Cabinet is RECOMMENDED to**
 - a) **Approve the strategic direction of travel for Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire and delegate authority to the Director of Children's Services for the delivery of the proposal, including the expenditure of the Department for Education (DfE) Grant and budget.**

Executive Summary

2. This report sets out the proposed strategic direction for the development of Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs) in Oxfordshire, as a core delivery mechanism for the council's Best Start in Life Plan. The Best Start in Life Plan responds to the national ambition for 75% of children to achieve a good level of development (GLD) by age five by 2028. While Oxfordshire is currently performing well, disparities remain for children eligible for free school meals. The council has therefore adopted more ambitious revised local targets to both improve overall attainment and reduce inequalities.
3. Best Start Family Hubs are a central component of this approach. They will provide welcoming, inclusive and accessible spaces offering integrated support to families from pregnancy through to age 19 (or 25 for those with SEND). The core offer will include the delivery of parenting and home learning environment programmes (including play and learn type sessions), support for children with additional needs and a healthy baby offer.
4. The strategic direction of Best Start Family Hubs will see five localities, aligned to the District and City Council footprint, with a primary Best Start Family Hub in each, which will have the responsibility for delivering the core offer, in line with the Department for Education (DfE) requirements. Within each locality, there will be a network of Best Start Family Hub Network sites, that could be delivered by partners, including VCFSE organisations (Voluntary, Community, Faith and Social Enterprise) or the Local Authority, which will deliver at least one of the core services regularly.

5. To support VCFSE organisations in the delivery of these services, it is proposed that a grant-based funding programme is developed to better support the sector involvement in delivering the core offer in line with the requirements, including parenting programmes, play and learning activities and outreach.
6. In addition, the development of Best Start Family Hubs will align closely with the existing Youth Offer, including the emerging Youth Partnerships, to support a more integrated 0–19 (or 25) offer. This will ensure continuity of support from early childhood through adolescence and create more joined-up pathways for families.

Oxfordshire's Best Start in Life Plan

7. In July 2025, government published the Giving every child the best start in life strategy. This is the government's strategy for improving child development and meeting the ambition that 75% of 5-year-olds in England have a good level of development (GLD) by 2028. The strategy has three core priorities:
 - a. Improving family services, providing high-quality support to parents and children from pregnancy to age 5.
 - b. More accessible early education and childcare.
 - c. Improving quality in early years including reception.
8. To meet the National ambition of 75% of 5-year-olds to achieve a good level of development, each local authority has been given a local target. For Oxfordshire these are:
 - a. All eligible children 77.8% (Oxfordshire 2025 outcome 70% (2% above National))
 - b. All free school meal (FSM) eligible children 50.8% (Oxfordshire 2025 Outcome 43% (7% below national))
9. Whilst the Council recognises the challenges of the national targets, the Council does not feel this is ambitious enough or that 1 in 4 children are not achieving GLD who are eligible for FSM is acceptable. Therefore, the council's approach has also included setting out revised local targets (RLT) to bring Oxfordshire in line with National performance and above the set local targets in 2026. The revised local targets are therefore;
 - a. All eligible children 79.8% (2% above Local Target)
 - b. All free school meal eligible children 59.8% (9% above Local Target)
10. As part of achieving this vision, the Council has published a Best Start in Life Plan, which sets out how it will achieve its Good Level of Development target. The plan for Oxfordshire was developed based on its existing Early Years Strategy and Early Help and Prevention Strategy.

11. The Best Start in Life plan sets out a clear vision that every child has the best start in life, and parents, parents-to-be, babies and young children have what they need to thrive.
12. Through achieving this vision, it will mean that all babies, children and families are safe, learning, happy, healthy and engaged.
13. The plan sets out four key priorities to achieving this vision:
 - a. **Healthy beginnings** - We will focus awareness raising of the importance of pregnancy and early childhood across all organisations in Oxfordshire and ensure additional support for families where this is needed.
 - b. **Strong foundations** - We will focus on working with partners to deliver coordinated support through Family Hubs and the wider Family Hub Network, including a range of parenting programmes, and resources to support home learning, supporting families to stay safe and nurturing positive early relationships and supporting babies and children to learn.
 - c. **High-quality early years learning** - We will focus on ensuring that all children can fully participate, achieve, and feel supported in the environments where they grow and develop. To support children to thrive and learn, we will invest in a strong and well-trained workforce and champion inclusive practice across the early years system.
 - d. **Strengthen our Best Start in Life Offer** - We will focus on working together across services and with families through our Family Hub Network and Family Hubs to continue to develop a wider Best Start in Life offer which is available when families need support local to where they live. We will share our data and use this to identify what families need and where they need it.

Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs)

14. As outlined in our Best Start Plan, the development and implementation of Best Start Family Hubs will be a key in achieving the Council's revised local target and outcome for babies, children, young people and families.
15. Best Start Family Hubs (BSFHs) will offer welcoming, inclusive, environments where every family feels valued and confident to ask for support. BSFHs will be open to all families with children aged 0–19 (or up to 25 for young people with SEND). While universally accessible, they will prioritise support for families with babies and young children, due to the critical time for cognitive, physical and emotional development.
16. At the core of our offer, in line with Government criteria, the Hubs will provide supportive parenting advice, stay and play activities, help with children's learning and development at home, preventative and universal health services

– especially for babies and their families – and early support for children with additional needs.

17. As well as the core offer, the BSFHs will offer holistic support tailored to the needs of the local communities and families and will ensure they are connected into the wider community offer, including, but not limited to, welfare advice, debt advice, early help, and help for those at risk of, or experiencing, domestic abuse.

Work to Date

18. In 2025 the Council commenced a programme looking at the potential for developing Family Hubs in Oxfordshire. The programme followed four key stages:
 - a. Scoping and analysis - The aim of this stage was to understand the need for and potential impact of Family Hubs in the county.
 - b. Strategic leadership - The aim of this stage was to develop the multi-agency strategic leadership for Family Hubs and work with the range of partners, including families & young people, to develop our shared understanding of need and vision and approach going forwards.
 - c. Implementation - This stage is to implement the model / approach identified in the previous stage.
 - d. Delivery and review - At this stage the aim would be to deliver the Family Hubs and to review, on an ongoing basis, opportunities to further develop and improve the offer to meet the changing needs of the county
19. As part of the scoping and analysis stage, the focus was on understanding the needs of families in the county and identifying ways of working and opportunities with partners and other key stakeholders. This has included:
 - a. Benchmarking of other Family Hubs
 - b. High level population analysis
 - c. Children's Social Care Research (using the last 4 years of data)
 - d. The Local Policy Lab research – Case Study.
20. As part of the scoping and analysis phase, engagement with a wide range of external stakeholders took place to learn more about key stakeholders and their priorities, ways of working and risks, and issues. The findings of this have been weaved into the direction of travel for the Programme.
21. As part of the Strategic Leadership stage, a multi-agency Programme Board was established. This board brings together partners from across health, education, social care, and the VCFSE to help shape the strategic direction of travel.

Vision and Ways of Working for Best Start Family Hubs

22. The vision for Family Hubs is that there is a network of provision across Oxfordshire for children and families to ensure their needs are met, which is underpinned by:
 - a. Access
 - b. Connection
 - c. Relationships.

23. This vision is underpinned by the following ways of working:
 - a. Babies, children, young people, parents and families will be at the centre of our work – In Oxfordshire, the development of Best Start Family Hubs will be shaped around the lived experience, strengths and needs of babies, children, young people, parents and families.
 - b. Partnership – Best Start Family Hubs in Oxfordshire will be developed and delivered through strong partnership working across the council, health, education, early years, social care, the VCFSE, and with families themselves. This means building a shared understanding of local need, agreeing common priorities, and working together to design and provide joined-up support around children and families.
 - c. Needs led – The development of Family Hubs will be shaped by a clear understanding of the needs of babies, children, young people and families across Oxfordshire, recognising that these needs vary between communities and over time. Services and support will be informed by data, local insight, evidence and engagement with families and partners, so that the offer reflects what matters most locally.
 - d. Outcome focused – An outcome-focused approach will help ensure that activity is purposeful, that resources are aligned to priorities, and that services make a demonstrable difference to the lives of families.
 - e. Sustainable – The Family Hubs model in Oxfordshire will be designed with long-term sustainability in mind, building on existing strengths, relationships and community assets. This will include making best use of available resources, embedding new ways of working into existing systems where appropriate, and ensuring that the model can adapt over time in response to changing needs, evidence and funding contexts.

- f. High quality – Best Start Family Hubs will be underpinned by a commitment to high-quality, welcoming and inclusive support that families can trust and access with confidence.

Strategic direction of travel

24. To achieve the vision and intended outcomes for babies, children, young people and families, and in light of the findings of the scoping and analysis stage, it is proposed that the Council develops five Family Hub Localities, with a primary Best Start Family Hub (BSFH) within each locality.
25. These localities will align with District and City Council boundaries and bring together the network of partners supporting babies, children, young people and families in each area. The locality networks will create a shared understanding of need and draw on the full range of services and expertise to shape robust, high-quality local provision.
26. The primary BSFHs will deliver the core offer in line with government criteria and will be led and staffed by the County Council. The proposed locations for the primary Best Start Family Hubs are:
 - a. Wantage / Grove area
 - b. Didcot area
 - c. Banbury area
 - d. Witney area
 - e. Blackbird Leys - Cuddesdon Corner (already operational)
27. The Council recognises that within the preferred locations for the primary BSFHs there will already be a range of provision provided by partners, including the VCFSE. Where this is identified, the Council will work closely with those partners to reduce duplication and explore options for co-delivery.
28. In line with the government requirements, across each locality Oxfordshire will have a number of Best Start Family Network Sites. These sites could be delivered by the Local Authority or partners, including the VCFSE, and will deliver at least one regular core service, such as a parenting programme, play and learn sessions.
29. The council also recognises that for many different reasons not all parents and families will access a Best Start Family Hub or Network site, so outreach to engage families in their home or more familiar community settings will be key. As part of this offer, the council will strengthen and expand the digital provision to develop a digital Family Hub offer. This offer will improve access to

information about local services and make it easier for families to use online support, including parenting and home-learning environment programmes.

Best Start Family Hubs and VCFSE

30. Oxfordshire has a thriving VCFSE sector, with a diverse range of organisations providing services and support across different ages. With the development of our Best Start in Life Plan and the focus on developing partnerships with the VCFSE, the Council will be providing £0.500m per annum for three years to develop infrastructure and services for the VCFSE. The Council proposes that this funding is utilised for infrastructure development and a grants-based programmes.
31. The aim of the infrastructure support would be to complement the existing infrastructure by providing increased support and coordination to those VCFSE working in the Early Years. The vision is that the Strategic Infrastructure Support will be able to support with:
 - a. Mapping and engaging the VCFSE
 - b. Ensuring that the VCFSE are kept up to date and engaged in national and local policy development
 - c. Support in workforce development
 - d. Ensuring there is a clear feedback loop between the VCFSE and Oxfordshire County Council.
32. The grant-based programme will support VCFSE organisations to deliver services in line with the Best Start Family Hub requirements and would need to be aligned to the following priority areas:
 - a. Locality and place-based – A key aim of Best Start Family Hubs is to improve the good level of development for children. We therefore need to ensure that we are targeting this funding to the areas where this will make the greatest impact, such as in the rural areas.
 - b. Workforce development – To support with the ongoing sustainability of VCFSE partners we need to ensure that the funding has a strong focus on workforce development that will help to strengthen the current provision and offer to families (i.e. funding for training).
 - c. Evidence-based approach – We want to ensure that the offer to families is evidence-based, and that we are maximising every interaction. For example, in stay and play sessions, we want to ensure that organisers are adopting evidence and research-based approach in the development of the sessions, so that sessions promote bonding, speech and language development, etc.
 - d. Parenting and Home-Learning Environment Programmes – As part of the Department for Education requirements, we have a requirement to

deliver parenting and home-learning environment programmes, however, we want to ensure that across the partnership we are working together to offer a consistent offer

33. To ensure that the council is aligned to the Department for Education requirements and our local priorities, the grant funding would be for the following areas:
 - a. Funding to deliver Parenting & Home-Learning Environment Programmes (in line with our local menu of interventions)
 - b. Expansion of play and learn sessions
 - c. Outreach
 - d. Seed / innovation funding
34. The grant would be open to all VCFSE organisations, including community run children's centres, to submit expressions of interest.
35. It should be noted that through engagement with VCFSE there have been questions about the future direction of travel regarding the leasing of County Council properties. It is anticipated that these will be addressed through the development of the Council's Community Asset Transfer (CAT) and Community Leasing policies. These policies seek to recognise and maximise the benefits of the devolution of assets to local communities. It seeks to do this by transferring the ownership or leasing council owned properties to community groups in recognition of the social value that they generate. These policies underwent an engagement period February – March 2026 and were approved at Cabinet on 21 April 2026.
36. The two policies are as follows:
 - a. Community Asset Transfer is about transferring the ownership of land or buildings from the council to a community organisation at less than "best consideration" – that is less than full market value – in order to achieve a public benefit.
 - b. Community Leasing follows the same principles but refers to the leasing of land of buildings at less than best consideration, in order to achieve a public benefit.

Best Start Family Hubs and Youth Services

37. In December 2025, the national government published a ten-year youth strategy. This strategy aims to tackle the challenges for this generation of young people and ensure every young person can thrive.

38. As part of the delivery of this strategy, the government is planning to open 50 new Youth Futures Hubs (of which 8 Local Authorities have received funding – Oxfordshire County Council has not received this funding). The ambition is that these hubs will deliver a blend of open access youth work, providing safe, welcoming spaces for all young people, and targeted support for those who may need more focused help. They will also act as single points for partnership working, bringing together organisations across community safety, careers and employability services, DWP Youth Hubs, mental health provision, and a wide range of voluntary and community sector partners to offer coordinated, wraparound support.
39. As well as the Youth Future Hub programme, the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) has developed a Local Youth Transformation Pilot. This is a national programme to rebuild a high-quality needs-led youth offer. It aims to re-establish local leadership in youth services and ensure young people's voices are central to decision making. It supports the direction of the national Youth Strategy which states that services should be shaped around local need, strengths and context, rather than a single, one-size-fits-all model.
40. Oxfordshire County Council was successful in an expression of interest for the first round of the Local Youth Transformation Pilot. As part of this, the council received funding to develop Youth Partnerships across the county, Youth Voice Strategy and a Youth Offer data dashboard.
41. The DCMS has advised that guidance may become available in Autumn 2026 in relation to future funding.
42. Local Youth Partnerships are now in place (or being set up) in every District and City Council, which is in line with the Family Hub locality footprints, bringing together the council, voluntary and community sector organisations, education, health and other partners including businesses, around shared priorities for young people. Each Youth Partnership has developed its own way of working, structures and leadership to reflect local priorities of demographics, existing provision and local capacity.
43. These partnerships support services to work together more effectively by coordinating activity, reducing duplication, and strengthening local decision-making. Leadership varies by area.

Best Start Family Hubs and Youth Partnerships

44. In line with government expectations, the Council is committed to strengthening the integration between Best Start Family Hubs and Youth Services, ensuring that children, young people and families can seamlessly access the right support at the right time.
45. Best Start Family Hubs will operate as part of a connected local system, where staff are equipped to confidently identify need and support families to navigate

both universal and targeted youth provision. This includes enabling Youth Services to flexibly utilise Family Hub spaces to deliver targeted interventions, such as 1:1 support, within community-based settings.

46. The alignment of Youth Partnerships with the Best Start Family Hub locality footprint provides a strong foundation to develop a coherent 0–19 (or up to 25 for those with SEND) offer. This approach supports a more joined-up pathway from early childhood through adolescence, improving continuity of support and strengthening outcomes for families.
47. The work currently being undertaken with youth partnerships also builds upon the wider place model and enables universal delivery to be coordinated via VCFSE as part of the council's statutory duty.

Delivering on The Strategic Ambitions

48. The Department for Education is providing three years of grant funding to support the development and delivery of Best Start Family Hubs nationally. Oxfordshire County Council has been allocated £5.529m of DfE grant funding across 2026/27 to 2028/29. This is profiled as £1.735m in 2026/27, £1.876m in 2027/28 and £1.918m in 2028/29. In addition, Oxfordshire County Council is providing a further £0.500m per annum to support delivery, creating a total confirmed funding envelope of £7.029m over the three years. Of this grant funding approximately £125k per annum is for capital expenditure only.
49. The DfE grant must be used in accordance with the grant conditions and the eligible expenditure criteria. A key condition of the grant is that the Council allocates funding across the different strands, which are programme development, parenting programmes, home learning programmes, support for children with additional needs and capital funding. The proposed spend profile will be developed to ensure that expenditure remains aligned to these categories and that the Council can evidence compliance with the grant requirements.
50. The funding available will support the development of five Best Start Family Hub localities, each with a primary Best Start Family Hub and the wider Best Start Family Hub Network Sites. Investment will be focused on delivering the required core offer, including parenting and home learning environment programmes, play and learn activity, outreach, and support for children with additional needs.
51. Financial oversight will be provided through the programme governance arrangements, with regular monitoring of spend, forecast expenditure, grant compliance and delivery progress. The Council will also meet DfE reporting requirements in relation to spend and delivery.
52. Performance monitoring will be developed alongside financial monitoring to ensure that the Council can demonstrate that the grant investment is achieving

the required deliverables and contributing to the intended outcomes. This will include monitoring delivery activity, take-up, reach and delivery of the core offer.

Corporate Policies and Priorities

53. The Children and Young People's Plan set out a vision of "Every child and young person will have the best possible start in life, the county will be a great place to grow up in, and children and young people will have opportunities to become everything they want to be. These life chances will be reflected equally across our rural and urban communities." As part of the plan, priority areas were identified, including providing help and support across the system at the earliest opportunity.
54. In Autumn 2024 the Early Help and Prevention Strategy was approved by the Children's Trust Board. The Early Help and Prevention Strategy in Oxfordshire is a comprehensive, multi-agency framework designed to ensure children, young people, and families receive timely and effective support before needs escalate.
55. As well as an Early Help and Prevention Board, an Early Years Strategy was approved by the Children's Trust Board in April 2024. The Early Years Strategy sets out how we will work together across the Early Years system to give all babies and children the start in life they deserve.
56. The Council has partnered with the UCL Institute of Health Equity to become a Marmot Place. This means the Council has committed to tackling health inequalities and improving health fairness in Oxfordshire by working with local partners across the system. These include local authorities, communities, public services, businesses, and voluntary and community sector organisations. The initial areas of focus for the Marmot Programme are to: give every child the best start in life, creating a fair employment and good work for all and ensuring a healthy standard of living for all.

Financial Implications

57. The Plan is expected to be funded by a combination of existing budget allocations and Best Start Family Hubs grant allocations from the Department for Education.

Comments checked by:

Lewis Gosling, Finance Business Partner (Children's Social Care)

Legal Implications

58. The Government through the Department for Education and Department for Health and Social Care has issued “Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies Guidance for local authorities April 2026 to March 2029” This non-statutory guidance sets out the vision and delivery expectations for Best Start Family Hubs (BSFH) and Healthy Babies for April 2026 to March 2029, building on learning from Sure Start, Family Hubs and Start for Life.

The Guidance expressly states that “local authorities should work with families, communities, professionals and partners in their areas to set a bold vision for strengthening family support. This should be delivered through strong leadership, joint governance and partnership arrangements, ensuring BSFHs sit at the heart of a universal and accessible network of family services.”

59. The Council has general legal powers under the Children’s Act 1989 and Children Act 2004 to establish family hubs to support children in their area.

60. Section 17 of The Children’s Act 1989 places a general duty on local authorities to promote and safeguard the welfare of children in need in their area by providing a range of services appropriate to those children’s needs

Section 10 of The Children Act 2004 places a duty on local authorities to work with other agencies for the benefit of children. They should work together to promote the wellbeing of children and young people in their area.

Comments checked by:

Anita Bradley, Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer.

Staff Implications

61. The Council is also reviewing how staff can be aligned to the Best Start Family Hub model and how existing services can be prioritised for delivery through these spaces.

Comments checked by:

Amy Warner, Strategic People Partner HR and Culture Change Team

Equality & Inclusion Implications

62. An Equalities Impact Assessment is currently being drafted and to date has not identified any negative impacts. This assessment will continue to be reviewed at key milestones of the programme.

Sustainability Implications

63. A Climate Impact Assessment will be completed as part of the further development of the programme to ensure there is sufficient information to understand the implications.

Risk Management

64. The multi-agency Programme Board will be responsible for the identification, mitigation and monitoring of risks and issues to the delivery of Family Hub Networks across Oxfordshire. Where risks are required to be escalated, this will be to the Early Help and Prevention Board.

Lisa Lyons Director of Children's Services

Annex: Oxfordshire's Best Start Family Hubs

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June 2026